

Arba'īn of Imām Ḥusayn

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Introduction

The 20th of Safar marks the fortieth day – Arba'īn - after the martyrdom of Imām Ḥusayn (a) in Karbalā'. After the fall of Saddam Husein, Iraq has seen a large influx of pilgrims from not just within Iraq, but as well as from all over the world, to mark the occasion of Arba'īn. In this brief article, we wish to explore the historical narrative regarding the events of Arba'īn and as well as its current significance in the Shi'a world.

The 20th of Safar

It has been reported that Jābir bin 'Abdillah al-Anṣārī (r) – a companion of the Prophet – arrived in Karbala on the 20th of Safar and encountered the martyrs on the plains of Karbala. Coincidentally, on their return back to Medina from Damascus - after having been imprisoned on the orders of Yazid - the caravan of Imam Ḥusayn (a) wished to make a detour towards Karbala first, and their arrival also happened to be on the 20th of Safar. Over there they met Jābir (r). The earliest extant report of this incident is recorded in *al-Luhūf* of Sayyid Ibn Ṭā'ūs as follows:

Thereafter Yazid ordered that the prisoners should return to Medina (from Syria). It is narrated that the holy head of Imam Ḥusayn (a) was sent back to Karbala where it was buried with his body. The Shi'a act according to this narration. There are other narrations beside the one we mentioned here. However, we overlook them because we have decided to write this book in brief. It is said that when the women and family members of Ḥusayn (a) returned from Syria and reached Iraq, they asked the caravan guide to lead them via Karbala. When the holy family reached the grave of Imam Ḥusayn (a), Jābir b. 'Abdillah al-Anṣārī and a group of Bani Hashim men were also there in order to visit the holy grave. All of them began to recite eulogies in an extremely sorrowful manner. Women of that area also joined them, and they stayed there for a few days.

The validity of the occurrence of this event – in particular the caravan of Imam Ḥusayn (a) coming back to Karbala and arriving there on the 20th of Safar - has been widely debated amongst Shi'a scholars and there is no consensus on the matter. We will present both sides of the arguments in this paper.

Arguments Against Its Occurrence

Numerous Shī'a scholars have cast doubt on the accuracy of the event as described in *al-Luhuf* of Sayyid Ibn Ṭā'ūs, including Ibn Ṭā'ūs himself. Other than him, scholars like 'Allāmah Majlisī, Mīrzā Ḥusayn Nūrī, Shaykh 'Abbās Qumī, Abū al-Ḥasan Sha'rānī and Shahīd Muṭāhharī have all rejected the occurrence of this event.

One of the most crucial arguments, if not the only argument, against the occurrence of this event is that the caravan could simply not have gone from Karbala to Kufa, then to Damascus, and back to Karbala in such a short period of time. According to the various reports available, the caravan of Imam Ḥusayn (a) stayed in the prison of Damascus between 3 to 7 days. Some statements suggest they remained in prison for a month or even a month and a half, but such reports are themselves mentioned with phrases such as "it has been said", which often indicates their weakness. In addition, there seems to have been no benefit for Yazid to have kept the caravan in Damascus for such a long period, hence a few days to a week seems to be more reasonable.

Ibn Ṭā'ūs in his work *al-Iqbal*, which he had written many years after *al-Luhūf* and approximately a decade before his own death, writes:

I have seen in Misbāḥ al-Mutahajjid that it is said the Ahl al-Bayt (a) alongside 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn (a) arrived in Medina on the 20th of Safar. Other than the work al-Miṣbāḥ, I found it saying that they arrived in Karbala from Syria on the very day - but both these views are far-fetched. This is because 'Ubaydullah b. Ziyād - may Allah's curse be upon him - wrote a letter to Yazid to seek permission to send the prisoners to Syria. He did not send the prisoners to Syria until he received Yazid's letter, which had taken 20 or more days. Likewise, it has been said that when the Ahl al-Bayt (a) were taken to Syria, they remained there for a month and were not protected from the heat and cold, and eventually returned to Iraq or Medina after the fortieth (of Safar). Their passing through Karbala on their return is possible, but not on the 20th of Safar, because as per the reports it has been mentioned that they met Jābir b. 'Abdullah Anṣārī, and if Jābir had come to Karbala for visitation from Hijaz, then by the time the report (of the martyrdom of Ḥusayn) had reached him and for him to travel to Karbala, it would have required him 40 days.¹

As it can be seen, Ibn Ṭā'ūs does not reject the possibility that the caravan could have passed by Karbala and met Jābir on their return to Medina, however he rejects the possibility of it having occurred on the 20th of Safar due to it being such a short time.

¹ Ibn Ṭā'ūs, *al-Iqbāl*, v. 3, pg. 100-101

In addition, ‘Allāmah Majlisī writes:

In the traditions, the reason for why Ziyārah of Arba’in is recommended has not been mentioned. The popular opinion amongst the companions is that the Ahl al-Bayt (a) returned to Karbala on that day on their return from Syria, and that ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn (a) buried the heads of the martyrs with their bodies. However, the second opinion on this matter is that the Ahl al-Bayt returned back to Medina on this day. Both of these views are seriously far-fetched, because this time period for both of these events (i.e. arriving in Karbala or Medina) is far too short, as it is known from the reports and other contextual clues. As for this having occurred in another year, that is also far-fetched.²

Mīrzā Ḥusayn Nūrī discusses the historical event of Arba’in in detail in his work *Lu’lu wa Marjān* and his student Shaykh ‘Abbās Qumī³ holds the same opinion as his teacher. Mīrzā Ḥusayn brings a number of arguments against the occurrence of this event, however his main argument is essentially the same as Ibn Ṭā’ūs’ and ‘Allāmah Majlisī’s which is that the time-frame in which Ibn Ziyād sought permission from Yazid to send the caravan to Damascus, and then for the caravan to be imprisoned there for a while and then return to Karbala is far too short.

Arguments For Its Occurrence

A number of scholars believe that the caravan of Imam Ḥusayn (a) did indeed arrive to Karbala on the 20th of Safar while on their return journey from Damascus to Medina. Abū Rayḥān Bīrūnī, Shaykh Bahā’ī and Sayyid Qāḍī Ṭabāṭabā’ī are a few such names. Perhaps the earliest written record of Jābir al-Anṣārī pilgrimage to the gravesite of Imam Husayn is in *Bishārat al-Muṣṭafā li Shī‘at al-Murtaḍā*⁴ written by Imād al-Dīn Ṭabarī (d. 553) – a student of Shaykh Ṭūsī’s son, a respected scholar in his own right all of whom were stringent students of rijāl studies and ḥadīth methodologies. Although the account in *Bishārat al-Muṣṭafā* does not mention Jābir’s meeting with the survivors of Karbala, it does indicate the very early pilgrimage practices and lamentation surrounding the martyrdom of Imam Ḥusayn (a).

Additionally, as some contemporary authors mention, lack of the early mention of meeting with the survivors of Karbala does not preclude the fact this could have occurred; in fact, as one scholar argues, we know that what has survived from the earliest accounts of Karbala, namely the works of Abū Mikhnaf, are preserved only in

² *Bihār al-Anwār*, vol. 98, pg. 334.

³ *Muntaha al-Amāl*, vol. 2, pg. 1014-1015.

⁴ For the account, see: Muḥammad b. Abī Qāsim ‘Imād al-Dīn Ṭabarī, *Bishārat al-Muṣṭafā li Shī‘at al-Murtaḍā*, (Najaf: al-Maktabat al-Ḥaydarīyya, 1383H), pg. 75.

part (not whole) by Ṭabarī in his famous work of history; as well as parallel processes surrounding recensions of the historical texts in later accounts.⁵

The lengthiest defense of the occurrence of the event is by Sayyid Qāḍī Ṭabāṭabā'ī who dedicated a book to the topic titled, *Tahqīq Darbāreh-ye Awwalīn Arba'in-i Hazrat Sayyid al-Shuhadā*. In this work he brings numerous arguments to defend the view that the caravan indeed arrived in Karbala on the 20th of Safar and the head of Imam Ḥusayn (a) was also buried with his (a) body on this day.

In order to refute the argument that the caravan could not have travelled from Karbala to Kufa, then to Damascus and back to Karbala in the span of 40 days, Sayyid Qāḍī Ṭabāṭabā'ī cites 17 cases of individuals and caravans who travelled similar or even longer distances in history, in a short amount of time. In these journeys one finds that the distance between Kufa to Damascus was often covered between 10 to 12 days, hence making it a physical possibility for the caravan to have gone to Karbala to Kufa, then to Damascus and back to Karbala in 40 days. Just two instances Sayyid Qāḍī cites to establish his point are as follows:

1) The distance between Makkah and Kufa is around 380 *farsakh*, while Imam Ḥusayn (a) left Makkah on the 8th of Dhū al-Ḥijjah with his caravan. It is also known through various historical alibis that the Imam's (a) caravan was not travelling at its fastest, especially since the Imam (a) was stopping at various intervals and engaging in communication with many groups of people on the way. Despite the slow journey and as well as delays caused by Ḥurr and his soldiers, he (a) arrived in Karbala by the 2nd of Muḥarram – making the whole journey around 24 days. This is while the distance between Makkah to Karbala is much greater than the distance between Damascus to Karbala.

2) Marwān b. al-Ḥakam sent 'Āmir b. Rabī'ah as a commander to fight Mukhtār and these soldiers travelled from Damascus to Kufa in ten days.

Sign of a Believer and the Ziyārah

One of the popular traditions for Arba'in is the tradition attributed to the 11th Imam, al-'Askarī (a). This tradition is found in *al-Mazār* of Shaykh al-Mufīd, *Miṣbāḥ al-Mutahajjid* and *Tahzīb al-Aḥkām* of Shaykh al-Ṭūṣī as follows:

رُويَ عَنْ أَبِي مُحَمَّدٍ الْحَسَنِ بْنِ عَلِيٍّ الْعَسْكَرِيِّ ع أَنَّهُ قَالَ: عَلَامَاتُ الْمُؤْمِنِ خَمْسٌ صَلَاةُ الْإِحْدَى وَ
الْخَمْسِينَ وَ زِيَارَةُ الْأَرْبَعِينَ وَ التَّحْتَمُ فِي الْيَمِينِ وَ تَعْفِيرُ الْجَبِينِ وَ الْجَهْرُ بِ بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

⁵ Fawzī Āl Sayf, *al-Abḥāth wa al-Maqālāt*, Markaz al-Ish'ā' al-Islāmi [Center of Islamic Radiance], islam4u.com/ar/shobahat/هل-التقى-الركب-الحسيني-بجابر-بن-عبد-الله-الأنصاري/؟

It has been narrated from Abī Muḥammad al-Ḥasan bin ‘Alī al-‘Askarī (a) who said: ‘The signs of a believer are five: fifty-one units of prayers, Ziyārah of Arba’īn, wearing the ring on the right hand, prostrating one’s forehead on the ground, and reciting *bismillah al-raḥmān al-raḥīm* loudly (in prayers).’

In some manuscripts the word believer is replaced with its plural, believers; and instead of fifty-one units, it says fifty units. The only other mishap that exists is in the version of the narration recorded in ‘*Awāli al-Liālī*’ by Ibn Abī Jamhūr (d. 901 hijri), where the narration is attributed to Imām Ṣādiq (a) – this is most likely a scribal error.⁶

There has been a lot of discussion on this narration, for two particular reasons. First and foremost, this narration does not have a chain of narrators, and is classified as *mursal*.

The second aspect of this tradition has to do with the phrase *Ziyārat al-Arba’īn* itself. There exists dispute over what this *visitation of the forty* exactly refers to. The *al* in *al-Arba’īn* would be an *al* of ‘*ahd*’ (a type of *al* used when the term is known to a given audience). Was the Ziyārah of Arba’īn – whether the recitation or a physical visitation on the 20th of Safar – such a common practice amongst the Shī’ā at the time that it was considered a sign of a believer and that it was something known amongst them? This is difficult to establish for us today with absolute certainty since the reports are too scarce in number.

To weaken this tradition even further, some scholars have argued that this is referring to the act of visiting forty believers. While this may seem like a plausible interpretation at first, but upon further deliberation it seems to stand on frail grounds. While there are numerous traditions talking about one’s relationship with other believers, there is nothing in Shī’ī or Sunnī traditions that gives any relevance to visiting forty believers specifically.

On the contrary, one indication that the 20th of Safar was perhaps a known date amongst some of the Shī’a is the actual recitation of Ziyārah itself. Shaykh Ṭūsī in his *al-Tahzīb* records a lengthy Ziyārah from Imam Ṣādiq (a) on the authority of his close companion Ṣafwān al-Jammāl.⁷ As such, it could be argued that perhaps there was a tradition amongst the Shī’a to recite this Ziyārah on the 20th of Safar and that Imam ‘Askarī (a) is referring to this act and referring to it as a sign of a believer.

Ultimately, despite the tradition of Imam al-‘Askarī (a) being *mursal*⁸, if the principle of leniency - accepted by numerous jurists - is applied on the tradition, it will be perfectly allowed to act on it and deem the Ziyārah of Arba’īn a recommended act. As for those

⁶ ‘*Awāli al-Liālī*, vol. 4, pg. 37

⁷ *Tahzīb al-Aḥkām*, v. 6, pg. 113

⁸ *le a tradition without a complete chain of narrators to the infallible*

jurists who do not accept this principle, then even according to them, such acts can be performed with the intention of *rajā'* (hope).⁹

The Arba'in Walk

Despite Mīrzā Ḥusayn Nūrī's negation of the fact that the caravan arrived in Karbala on the 20th of Safar, researchers affirm that the practice of the current annual walk can be traced back to Mīrzā Nūrī himself. According to contemporary historian Ayatullah Yusafī Gharawī, Mīrzā Nūrī saw these last days of Safar as an opportunity to take students of the seminary of Najaf from Najaf to Karbala and arrive there on the 20th of Safar. This journey would take them three days in total. Eventually as others became aware of their practice, they began to join them on this walk annually until it became an established practice. Numerous scholars over the centuries have since walked specifically during the days of Arba'in.

During Saddam's brutal dictatorship, there were severe restrictions on this walk and majority of the people could not participate in it. However, after his fall in 2003, Iraq has seen a natural revival of the walk which constitutes of millions of people participating in it from all parts of the world.

At the same time, there have been some who have cast doubt on the relevance of the walk itself and whether it is necessary. It should be pointed out that there are numerous traditions, particularly from Imam Bāqir (a) and Imam Ṣādiq (a) that mention specific rewards for those who walk and take strides towards the grave of Imam Ḥusayn (a). Hence, as per these traditions, walking in it and of itself has relevance and a lot of reward. Only a few of these traditions will be quoted below:

1) Abū al-Ṣāmit says, I heard Abā 'Abdillah (a) say: Whoever comes to the grave of Ḥusayn (a) while walking, Allah writes a thousand good deeds for him for every step, erases a thousand sins and raises him a thousand levels.¹⁰

2) Al-Ḥusayn b. Thuwayr b. Abī Fākhita narrates from Abū 'Abdillah (a) who said: O Ḥusayn (b. Thuwayr), whoever leaves his house intending to visit the grave of Ḥusayn b. 'Alī (s), if he is walking, Allah will write for him a good deed for every step and erase a sin for him, until he arrives at the Ḥā'ir (i.e. the grave & its nearby environs).¹¹

In the next tradition the Imam differentiates the reward one receives for the steps they take and as well as the steps that their animal transport takes:

⁹ *It is to perform an act in the hope that it is desired by Allah*

¹⁰ *Kāmil al-Ziyārāt*, pg. 133.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 132

3) ‘Abdullah b. Muskān from Abī ‘Abdillah (a) who said: Anyone from our Shī’a who visits Ḥusayn, he will not return back until every sin of theirs will be forgiven and a thousand good deeds will be written for them, a thousand sins will be erased for them and they will be raised a thousand levels for every step that they take and for every step that their animal takes.¹²

In another tradition from Imam Ṣādiq (a) transmitted by Qudāma b. Mālīk, he (a) says:

4) A Ḥajj is written for every step a person takes, and an ‘Umrah is written every time a person raises their foot.¹³

In conclusion, it is also pertinent to quote the views of one of the leading jurisconsults regarding the walk, also renowned for his expertise in the science of Rijāl, Āyatullah Sayyid Shubayrī Zanjānī, who says:

در روایات بسیاری بر زیارت آن حضرت تاکید شده، حتی در پاره ای از این روایات، از وجوب و فرض بودن این زیارت یاد شده، تا بدانجا که برخی علماء همچون مرحوم علامه مجلسی و پدر بزرگوارشان به این نظر متمایل شده اند که بر کسی که توانایی انجام زیارت آن حضرت را دارد این زیارت در عمر یک بار واجب است. اما امروز این پیاده روی تبدیل به یکی از شعائر اسلامی و وسیله ترویج مذهب است و از این باب مصداق روایات مربوط به تعظیم شعائر الله است

The ziyārah of Imam Ḥusayn (a) has been mentioned in numerous traditions, to the extent that some traditions deem it from one of the obligatory acts. Some scholars, such as ‘Allāmah Majlisi and his father leaned towards the view that if one attains the ability to perform his (a) ziyārah one time in their life, then it is obligatory upon them to do so. As for today, this walk has turned into one of the Islamic symbols and a source for spreading the religion, hence it is an instance of traditions associated to venerating the symbols of Allah.¹⁴

¹² *Ibid.*, pg. 134

¹³ *Ibid.*, pg. 144

¹⁴ Official website <http://www.zanjani.ir> – see article بررسی جایگاه پیاده روی اربعین در گفتگو با آیت الله العظمی شبیری زنجانی